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ABSTRACT

The literature discussing professional practices of school psychology in South America is very meager. This study attempted to identify demographic characteristics of school psychologists in four South American countries, their typical responsibilities, significant problems, and threats that jeopardize the delivery of psychological services within the schools. Questionnaires were completed by informed psychologists in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela. The results revealed that school psychologists were overwhelmingly female. Most were found to have undergraduate degrees; only in Venezuela did the proportion of school psychologists with graduate degrees exceed that of psychologists with undergraduate degrees. Important differences existed in the number of professional programs available in the countries. High percentages of school psychologists were members of national associations. Respondents from all four countries rated as very important knowledge and skill areas that focused on the academic areas of psychology emphasizing individual differences, intelligence, motivation, professional service, work with the visually and physically impaired, learning disabilities, and parent education. A significant area of stress in all countries was low salaries, and threats to service included lack of research and evaluation, conflicts with competing professional groups, and lack of proper funding. (Differences among the countries are discussed; references and data tables are included.) (NB)

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SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

IN SOUTH AMERICA

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The literature discussing professional practices of psychology in schools in South America is very meager. In contrast to the vast information known about the U.S. (e.g., Reynolds & Gutkin, 1982) and Western Europe (e.g., Catterall, 1976, 1977 & 1979), published reports on Brazil (Wechsler & Gomes, 1986; Van Kolck & Barrow, 1985) and Columbia (Suarez, 1976) are limited. Literature on Chile, Venezuela, and other important South American nations could not be located.

This paper summarizes the information obtained recently through the use of a detailed questionnaire that surveyed informed psychologists in Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and Venezuela. Those portions of the survey that are directed toward identifying demographic characteristics of school psychologists, their typical responsibilities, significant problems, as well as internal and external threats that jeopardize the delivery of psychological services within schools are described and discussed below.

Demographic Characteristics

School psychologists are overwhelmingly female (Table 1); they range from an estimated 75 percent in Chile and Columbia to 95 percent in Brazil. Their average age in all four countries is 35. Most work about nine months each year; those in Columbia work 11 months.

Academic Preparation

In general, the plurality have BA degrees; in contrast, between 5 and 10 percent have doctoral degrees. Only in Venezuela do the proportion of school psychologists with graduate degrees exceed those with undergraduate degrees. Within Chile and Venezuela, the overwhelming number of students enter school psychology with undergraduate degrees in education.

Important differences exist in the number of professional programs available in the countries.

Masters level programs number 9 in Brazil, 2 in Columbia, and 1 Venezuela. Doctoral level programs number 3 in Brazil and 1 Venezuela. Thus, the majority of programs exist at the undergraduate level.

Membership in Professional Associations

High percentages of school psychologists are members of one or more national association in these four countries. The percentages range from a high of 90 percent in Brazil to 40 percent in Venezuela. The percent who are members of one or more international professional association is 10 or less.

Importance of Knowledge and Skill Areas

Among the almost 100 knowledge and skill areas listed on the questionnaire, 11 are very important to school psychologists in all four countries (Table 2). These commonalities focus on the academic areas of psychology that emphasize individual differences, intelligence, motivation, as well as professional service that include assessment, work with visually and physically impaired student, learning disabled students, and parent education. Those areas that are very important to school psychologists in three countries include assessment-related issues (e.g., observational techniques), interventions (e.g., behavioral approaches, group therapy and group dynamics), students with auditory and mental impairments, gifted students, and areas of academic psychology that include human growth and development, personality, and attitude and value formation.

Thirty-five other areas were identified as being very important to school psychologists in two countries, and an additional 20 were very important to those in one country. Only six of the approximate 100 areas were not identified as being very important in one of the four. These include organizational records, individual therapy, organizational change techniques, supervisor leadership training, factors affecting organizational moral, and school-community relations.

Problematic and Stressful Work Areas

The respondents were asked to indicate areas in their work that are problematic and stressful (Table 3). The following problems and stresses were judged to be significant. The low amount of remuneration school psychologists receive compared to physicians and lawyers clearly is the most significant problem common to all four countries and a significant source of stress in three. None of the other 15 areas constitute significant common problems or sources of stress in three or more countries. The following are significant problems in two countries: opportunities for professional advancement, status among psychologists, pay compared to educators, and managing families and professional responsibilities. Two areas constitute significant sources of stress in two countries; status among psychologists and opportunities for professional advancement.

One also may note that the respondents from Brazil and Venezuela indicated the largest members of problems (n=8) and stress (n=5) followed by Chile with five problems and four sources of stress and Columbia with one problem and no sources of stress.

Internal Threats to Psychological Services

The respondents were asked to indicate what internal and external threats presently jeopardize the delivery of psychological services in schools (Table 4). Seven internal threats were identified. The lack of research and evaluation data on issues important to the profession is judged to be significant in all four reporting countries. The lowering of standards for selecting and preparing professionals and a lack of leadership within the profession were identified by two countries. School psychological services in Brazil and Chile appear to be in greatest jeopardy; fewer internal threats appear in Venezuela and Columbia.

External Threats to Psychological Services

Nine external threats to school psychological services were identified (Table 5). Three conditions are judged to be significant in three countries: conflicts with competing professional groups, other professional groups taking our jobs, and lack of money to properly fund services. Three other external threats are judged to be significant in two of the four countries.

Conclusions

Thus, a number of similarities are noted among school psychologists in Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and Venezuela. They are over whelmingly female, average 35 years of age, have BA degrees, work about nine months yearly, and belong to one or more national professional associations. They commonly rely on knowledge and skills associated with individual differences, intelligence and motivation. They work with children exhibiting visual, physical, and learning impairments and utilize tests, particularly intelligence tests. They also find the low pay to be a significant problem and significant source of stress.

Commonalities also exist among the areas of knowledge and skills that are less important. For example, school psychologists in these countries seemingly

perceive organizational issues about education to be outside their scope of work and responsibility. Although the need for organizational change is apparent, they do not perceive these activities as important to their professional roles.

Differences also exist among the countries. Fewer professional preparation programs exist in Venezuela. They also have the smallest percent of school psychologists holding membership in professional association. Differences also exist in the number of knowledge and skills thought to be very important. Chilean school psychologists identify the largest number (55) followed by Brazil (47), Columbia (38) and Venezuela (30). Chile and Brazil also identify the largest number of significant problems and sources of stress. as well as internal and external threats. If these data accurately reflect the current status of school psychology within the four countries, we may conclude that the school psychological services provided in Chile and Brazil, compared to those provided in Columbia and Venezuela, may be somewhat complex and diverse. Furthermore, the extensive distances within the geography of these countries together with their significant regional differences are likely to create conditions that impede the effective delivery of services.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of School Psychologists in Four South American Countries

	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venezuela
Percent female	95	75	75	90
Average age	35	35	35	35
Proportion with degrees				
BA	75	85	50	30
MA	20	10	40	60
doctoral	5	5	10	10
Academic background of students				
psychology	90	100	30	80
education	10		60	20
other			10	
Number of professional programs				
MA	9		2	1
doctoral	3		0	1
Average number of weeks worked yearly	35	37	48	35
Percent who belong to one or more associations				
nationally	90	70	50	40
internationally	10	5	5	

Table 2

Areas within which Knowledge and Skill are Very Important for School Psychologists in Four South American Countries

Knowledge and Skill Area	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venezuela
Common to the four countries				
student records	x	x	x	x
tests of intellectual functioning	x	x	x	x
tests of educational achievement	x	x	x	x
parent education	x	x	x	x
visual impaired	x	x	x	x
learning disabled	x	x	x	x
physically impaired	x	x	x	x
standardized procedures for administering tests	x	x	x	x
individual differences	x	x	x	x
motivation	x	x	x	x
intelligence	x	x	x	x
Common to three countries				
observational techniques	x	x		x
classroom organization	x	x		x
behaviorally-oriented approaches	x	x	x	
group therapy	x	x		x
auditory impaired	x	x	x	
mentally retarded	x	x	x	
gifted	x	x	x	
data collection techniques	x	x	x	
human growth and development	x	x		x
learning	x	x	x	
personality	x	x	x	
attitude and value formation		x		x
vocational choice	x	x	x	
group dynamics	x	x		x
test utility concepts		x	x	
Common to two countries				
interviewing techniques		x	x	
group tests of mental ability	x			x
diagnostic tests	x	x		

Table 2--p. 2

	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venezuela
sociometric measures (e.g., sociograms)	x	x		
assessing psychological needs of special populations		x	x	
vocational interest measures	x		x	
measures of values		x		
project techniques	x			x
measures of self-concept		x		
neuropsychological tests	x			x
classroom management techniques		x		x
basic academic skills		x	x	
vocational development		x	x	
cognitive/rational approaches		x		
community-based approaches to mental health				x
crisis intervention techniques	x			x
conflict management techniques		x		
consultation techniques			x	
counseling and guidance techniques	x		x	
performance evaluation of appraisal		x	x	
physiology and anatomy		x		
perception		x		x
cognition		x		x
psychopathology		x		x
language development		x		x
organization structure	x	x		
principles and standards of test construction		x	x	
types of test scores and norms		x	x	
strengths and limitations of assessment procedures		x	x	
validity concepts		x	x	
reliability concepts		x	x	
factors that may influence test performance		x	x	
effects of coaching and practice on test performance		x	x	
test fairness concepts		x	x	
research and experimental design		x	x	

Table 2--p. 3

	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venezuela
Unique to one country				
advanced statistical concepts		x		
medical records and reports				x
work sample (performance) tests				x
tests of social maturity/ development/adaptive behavior				
personality inventories and rating scales	x			
attitude scales	x			
perceptual motor tests	x			
psychophysiological measures	x			
personal-social adjustment techniques		x		
marital and family therapy techniques				x
educational remediation techniques			x	
tests of special aptitudes			x	
in-service education techniques		x		
psychoanalytically-oriented approaches	x			
client-centered approaches	x			
humanistic approaches	x			
stress management techniques				
systems and organizational development	x			
legal issues		x		
ethical issues		x		
information about job requirements		x		
organizational records				
individual therapy				
organizational change techniques				
supervisor leadership training				
factors affecting organizational moral				
school-community relations				

Table 3

Areas that Constitute Significant Problems and Sources of Stress Among School Psychologists in Four South American Countries

Possible Areas of Problems and Stress	Countries							
	Brazil		Chile		Columbia		Venezuela	
	Pblm	Stress	Pblm	Stress	Pblm	Stress	Pblm	Stress
p y (compared to physicians and lawyers)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
opportunities for professional advancement	x	x	x	x				
status among psychologists	x	x					x	x
opportunities to confer with colleagues in school psychology	x	x					x	
pay (compared to educators)	x	x					x	
managing family and professional responsibilities	x		x	x				
having sufficient time to conduct assigned responsibilities			x	x				
supervised by persons who have little expertise in school psychology	x	x					x	x
acceptance as a professional							x	x
assuming responsibilities unrelated to their training							x	x
having high self-expectations and aspirations	x							
need to make compromises between the needs of the organization and professional standards			x					
assuming responsibilities unrelated to psychology							x	
status among educators	x							
status among the public								
unimportant job-related distractions								

Pblm = a significant problem
Stress = a significant source of stress
x = the problems is a significant source of stress

Table 4

Internal Threats Which May Jeopardize the Delivery of Psychological Services Within Schools in Four South American Countries

Possible Sources of Internal Threats	Countries			
	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venezuela
lack of research and evaluation data	x	x	x	x
lowering standards for selecting and preparing professionals	x	x		
lack of leadership within the profession	x			x
lack of professional standards governing professional services	x	x		
the more able professional are leaving the profession	x			
inadequate specialization in school psychology		x		
greater appeal of other areas of ~~professional~~ psychology	x			
conflicts of leadership within the profession				
professional burn-out				

marks note the presence of internal threats

Table 5

External Threats Which May Jeopardize the Delivery of Psychological Services Within Schools in Four South American Nations

	Countries			
Possible Sources of External Threats	Brazil	Chile	Columbia	Venzuela
conflicts with competing professional groups		x	x	x
other professional groups taking our jobs	x	x		x
lack of money to properly fund services	x	x		x
lack of political stability in the country	x	x		
lack of economic stability in the country	x	x		
lack of public support for education		x		x
traditional lack of sources				
low status of psychology in my country				
low status of education in my country	x			x

marks note the presence of external threats